

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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Pentecost 15
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Substance over form

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When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Substance over form

Rules and traditions can draw us closer to God, but our gospel this morning tells us that they can also be used by Satan to snatch us away.

It's not when we light the candles or if we kneel or sit at a certain point in a worship service that's of great importance. Jesus tells us that what really matters

is what we do in response to God's commandment; how we behave, how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves.

One specific sentence in our reading points us to that important message: Jesus says to the Pharisees and scribes,

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

The commandment of God. We are to never ignore the commandment of God.

The greatest commandment of God as identified in what we call the Old Testament and by Jesus is that we are to love God with all that we are and we are to love our ourselves and we are to love others every bit as much. God gives this commandment as far back as the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18) as recorded in the first five books of our Old Testament and in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote Jesus saying the same thing.

Our love for God, our love for others, and our love for ourselves are all bound up in this commandment.

We are to love God with everything we are and while that seems like a lot, everything we are, imagine for a moment the enormity of God loving us with all that God is. That's so much greater. God's love, God's capacity to love and willingness to forgive is overwhelming. It's greater than anything we can grasp.

It doesn't matter who we are or what terrible sins we have committed in our lives, God wants to forgive us. God will forgive us.

All he asks of us is that we recognize our sins and confess them to Him, that we do our very best to not commit them again, and that we ask for His forgiveness. There's also one more step toward the peace and comfort of forgiveness and it's sometimes the most difficult step. That step is accepting God's forgiveness.

Accepting God's forgiveness means that we must forgive ourselves. We must fully accept God's forgiveness and forgiving ourselves is essential.

If we don't do that, it's a slap in the face of God and even saying that makes me squirm! I never want to refuse God.

In our reading this morning Jesus gives a long list of things that can come out of us that will defile us. He lists theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, and pride and a few others.

Jesus doesn't include 'refusing God's gift of forgiveness' on his list, but I'm quite sure if we studied the original meaning of each of those words on his list, we would find that 'refusing God's gift of forgiveness' is definitely included in those behaviors that defile us.

A verse in Acts (10:15) supports the importance of cooperating with God when forgiveness is needed. In that verse, a voice from Heaven is speaking to Peter and says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." When God forgives us we must forgive ourselves.

Jesus tells us that what really matters is what we do in response to God's commandment. How we behave, how we treat ourselves, and how we treat others.

Jesus tells us that we must forgive our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus offers forgiveness to everyone who repents and asks for forgiveness. God will forgive us. We are called to accept that extraordinary gift. We are called to cooperate with God.

May we all acknowledge our sins, repent of our sins, and ask for forgiveness as many times as we need it. May we also forgive those who sin against us and may we forgive ourselves as fully as God most certainly forgives each one of us.

Amen.